Sufism and the Perennity of the Mystical Quest

by

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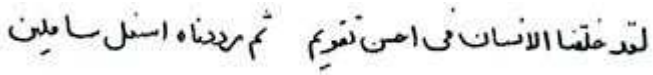

Surely We created man of the best stature (*ahsan taqwīm*)
Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low (*asfal sāfilīn*).
(Quran. *al-Tīn* (the Fig), XCV, 4-5).

(Think not that if thou passest away, the world will also be gone;
A thousand candles have burned out, yet the circle of the Sufis remains.

THE Quranic verse cited above defines the situation of man in this world in a manner that is at once perennial and universal. Man was created in the best stature (*ahsan taqwīm*) but then fell into the terrestrial condition of separation and elongation from his divine prototype, a condition which the Quran calls the lowest of the low (*asfal sāfilīn*). And inasmuch as the situation described in this Quranic verse pertains to the innermost nature of man it is a permanent reality that he carries within himself. No amount of supposed evolution and change can destroy the divine image which is his origin or the state of separation and hence wretchedness and misery in which he finds himself due to this very separation from his spiritual origin. Man carries both the image of perfection and the experiential certainty of separation within himself and these elements remain as permanent aspects and conditions of the human state above and beyond all historical change and transformation.[1]

Concerning the Quranic term *ahsan taqwim* the ninth/fifteenth century Sufi commentator Kamāl al-Dīn Husayn Kāshifī writes that it means God "created man as the most complete and perfect theophany, the most universal and all-embracing theater of divine hierophany, so that he may become the bearer of the divine trust (*amānah*) and the source of unlimited effusion".[2] And he identifies *asfal sāfilīn* with the world of natural passions and heedlessness. Hence man at once bears the imprint of the "divine form"—he possesses a theomorphic nature according to the *hadīth*, "God created man in His own image" (*khalaqa ʻLlāh ādam ʻalā sūratihi*)[3]—and has fallen from this innate perfection which yet he cannot forget.

The grandeur of the human state, its great possibilities and perils, and the permanent nature of man's quest after the Divine thus lies in the very fibers of human existence. Were man to be only "of the best stature" and were he to remain in the paradisiac state

of proximity to the Divine and of identity with his celestial archetype, there would be no mystical[4] quest in the usual meaning of the term. There would already be union; the goal which stands at the end of the mystical and spiritual life would have already been achieved. Likewise, if man were to be only a creature of the sensory world, bound to passionate impulses and imprisoned by his natural and physical inclinations, or in other words were he to be only in the state of *asfal sāfilin*, again there would be no mystical quest possible. Man would not remain dissatisfied with the finite and would not continue to seek, albeit often blindly, the Infinite Reality, which would deliver him from the bonds of the finite and the limited. He would be content as an earthly creature. Transcendence would have no meaning for him. He would be limited like other earthly creatures and also like them he would remain unaware of the fact that he is limited and bound in space and time. But precisely because both of these elements, the theomorphic nature and the terrestrial crust which covers and hides this spiritual core, are parts of human nature, man lives in this world and is yet bound by his own nature to transcend it. The mystical quest is as permanent as human existence itself, for man cannot remain man without seeking the Infinite and without wanting to transcend himself. To be human means to want to transcend the purely human. Hence to be satisfied with the purely human is to fall into the infra-human state.

The mystical quest is perennial because it lies in the nature of things, and normal human society is one in which such a quest is given recognition in the life of the collectivity. When a collectivity or society ceases to recognize this profound need and when fewer men follow the vocation of a traveler upon the mystical path, then that society crumbles through the sheer weight of its own structure or dissolves as a result of psychic maladies it is not able to cure, by the very fact that it has denied to its members the only food that can satisfy the hunger of the psyche for the Spirit. In such cases certain men will continue to seek and to follow the mystical way, but society will no longer be able to benefit fully from the illuminative presence of those men who in seeking the supra-human allow man to remain on the human level and provide society with the only true criteria of its worth and value.

If men of a spiritual and contemplative nature continue to appear even in the darkest periods of spiritual eclipse it is precisely because the economy of a human collectivity necessitates their existence. Were human society to be without any contemplatives at all, it would simply cease to exist. All terrestrial existence comes from Being, the luminous source of all that exists, and being and knowledge are ultimately one. Were the light which the contemplative casts upon the terrestrial environment to come to an end, the bond between Being and its earthly manifestations would terminate and the latter would become deprived of the conscious ontological nexus with its source. It would fall into the abyss of nothingness. Moreover, since the purpose of creation is that through it as summarized in the heart of the gnostic the Divine comes to know Himself, without the contemplative creation would cease to have *a raison d'être*.[5] That is why in Islam it is said “The earth shall never be empty of the ‘witness of God’” (*Lā takhlu ’l-ard ‘an hujjat Allāh*). The quest after the infinite alone provides meaning for the finite world in which man finds himself on earth. The imprint of that perfection which man bears within himself makes any finite existence bearable for man only provided it can lead him to the Infinite and the Absolute.[6] Hence the perennity of the mystical quest and the search of man throughout the ages to see beyond the finite the Infinite Reality which determines and encompasses all things.

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The cosmos itself continually reveals to man the eternal message of the Truth. Its finite forms reveal the traces of the Infinite. As ʻAlī said, "I wonder at the man who observes the universe created by God and doubts His Being and Existence".[7] But to gain this awareness man has need of revelation, which like the cosmos comes from the Infinite and the Absolute but in a more direct sense, and hence serves as the key for the unfolding of the mysteries of man's own being as well as those of the Universe. Revelation is in itself a gift that has descended from the Divine Mercy (*al-rahmah*) to enable man to pass beyond the finite to the Infinite. Having fallen from the state of "the best stature" to that of the "lowest of the low" man cannot regain the former state save through the grace of heaven.

To him, whose soul attains the beatific vision,
The universe is the book of "The Truth Most High".
Accidents are its vowels, and substance its consonants.
And grades of creatures its verses and pauses.[8]
(Shaykh Mahmūd Shabistarī)

The saving grace of revelation alone makes possible this journey of the soul from the outward to the inward, from the periphery to the centre, from the form to the meaning, the journey which is none other than the mystical quest itself. And because of the intimate relation which the soul possesses with the cosmos, this journey is at once a penetration to the centre of the soul and a migration to the abode beyond the cosmos. In both places, which are in reality but a single locus, resides the Divine Presence.

As a Sufi master of the last century has written: "The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos".[9]

It is only by the grace of revelation or the message from Heaven in whatever form it might be envisaged that the soul is able to free itself from the taint of finitude and imperfection to seek the Infinite and to pursue the task for which it was created. To quote Khayyam:

O soul! from earthly taint when purified,
As spirit free, thou shalt toward heaven ride.

Thy home the empyrean! Shame on thee
Who dost in this clay tenement reside!

In love eternal He created me
And first He taught the lore of charity.

Then from my heart he filed a key that might
Unlock the treasures of Reality.

In some low Inn I'd rather seek Thy face,
Than pray without Thee toward the Niche's place.

O First and Last of all! As Thou dost will,
Burn me in Hell—or save me by Thy grace![10]

But the saving grace of revelation is always there and has always been there. To be human is to see before man the path that leads from the relative to the Absolute; it is to be able to follow the mystical way. As Rumi says:

The moment thou to this low world wast given,
A ladder stood whereby thou mightst aspire.[11]

The transparency of the cosmos and its function as a ladder to the metacosmic reality can only be realized if the grace provided by revelation is operative and if by virtue of this grace the soul has been able to penetrate into its centre and truly become itself.[12] And this possibility is always there even if it is not realized by all men. Both revelation and the cosmos—the second by virtue of the first—can lead man to that Infinite whose joy and beatitude so many seek in the shadows of the finite world.

Revelation is limited in its outer form; it is outwardly finite and so appears to men as one more finite form along with others that surround him in this world. But unlike other forms, the religious and revealed forms open inwardly toward the Infinite, because it is from the supra-formal Center that they originate, the Center which contains all these forms and is yet above them.[13] The reason for the persistence of traditional religious forms is none other than this fact that although outwardly they are forms subject to time and space, their inner content is Infinite. Hence they reflect even in the transient world of time and space the permanence that belongs to the spiritual world. They thus fulfill that perennial need of man to transcend the finite, to go beyond the transient and seek the permanent.

As for the cosmos, traditional cosmologies, Islamic as well as Christian and even those of some of the Hindu and Buddhist schools—just to speak of some of the better known examples—depicted it as finite in outward form but these cosmologies, like revelation or tradition to which they were intimately bound, were infinite in their symbolical content. The traditional cosmos was bound in space; its limits were almost "felt" and certainly visible. When traditional man looked to the stars he saw in the heaven of the fixed stars the limits of the Universe. Beyond that heaven was not "space" but only the Divine Presence. This finite cosmos, however, was far from being a prison without an opening. On the contrary by the very fact of its finite form it served as an icon to be contemplated and transcended. Thanks to its symbolism—the concentric spheres acting as a most powerful and efficient symbol for the states of being which man must traverse to reach Being Itself—the content of this cosmos was infinite and its finite forms like the forms of religion led man to an inner content which is limitless.

Modern science since Giordano Bruno has broken the boundaries of the cosmos and hence destroyed the very notion of "cosmos" which means literally "order". The Universe has become limitless outwardly. But precisely because the symbolic meaning of this new vision of the Universe has not been made generally known and, moreover, because modern science leaves aside the symbolic significance of things, the content of this outwardly "infinite" Universe remains finite. In a sense the situation has become the reverse of what existed in traditional science. There, the cosmos is outwardly finite but with an inner content that leads to the Infinite, whereas in modern science the Universe is outwardly infinite but inwardly finite. Hence on the one hand modern man seeks to fly to the planets and "conquer space", due to an unconscious urge to transcend his earthly finitude—but in a physical manner which is the only manner modern men believe to be possible—; on the other hand those modern men who understand the full implication of the finiteness of the contents of the Universe as conceived by modern science are subdued by this very realization and often seek an outlet from the tyranny of the finite physical world through the use of drugs, which they believe will open to them "the doors of perception" into another world.

Both those who wish to fly into space and those who break the hold of physical sensations upon them by the use of drugs which enable them to experience reality differently prove through these very efforts the perennity of the mystical quest, in the sense that man in whatever age he lives needs the Infinite and the Absolute in order to remain man. His finite psyche can remain sound only when it is in quest of that Beloved the union with which is the goal of all mystical romances.

The failure of such efforts, whether space flights or "trips" made possible through drugs, a failure which is instinctively felt by most men to be a poor substitute for that felicity and peace which accompanies all true contacts with the Spirit, itself proves that only a true mysticism that comes from God through one of His revealed religions can make the mystical quest successful. Only a path that comes from God can lead to Him and only such a path can guarantee the soul final beatitude and union with the One. Only traditional authority can protect the soul from the great dangers that lurk upon the path of him who wishes to climb mountains without a guide and without following an existing trail. The end of the one path is the absorption of the soul in its divine prototype; the end of the other is the dissolution and decomposition of the very substance of the soul. The soul of man was made by God and only He has the right to re-mould it. He has given man the urge for the mystical life and the desire for the perfection which lies at the end of the path. He has also provided for man the genuine means to reach this end. It is for man to distinguish between the rope and the snake and to choose the path which will lead him from the *asfal sāfilin* to the state of *ahsan taqwīm*, the path which will allow him to be truly himself.

* * *

Sufism is one such path, placed by God within the bosom of Islam in order to provide the possibility of spiritual realization for the millions of men who over the ages have followed the religion of the Quran. In its essence it joins the paths of spiritual realization found in other traditions while in its formal aspect it shares the particularities of Islam.[14] It is the path within Islam that leads from the particular to the Universal, from multiplicity to Unity, from form to the supra-formal Essence. Its

function is to enable man to realize Divine Unity (*al-tawhīd*), the truth which has always been and will always be. It is the depository of the "eternal mysteries" (*asrār-i alast*) going back to the primordial pact made between God and man even before the creation of the world.[15] Its message is therefore perennial, referring to the profound nature of man which lies beneath the layers of dross that the passage of the ages and the gradual removal of man from his original perfection in the state of *ahsan taqwīm* have imposed upon that original theomorphic kernel at the center of man's being. In its doctrines Sufism speaks of a truth that is at once perennial and universal; in its methods it employs techniques which are conformable to the nature of the men of this age, a nature which in its essence remains unchanged from that of primordial man but which in its accidents and outward manifestations has become ever more impermeable to spiritual influences and which in its contemplative faculties has become ever more atrophied and weakened.

Sufism serves essentially the function of reminding man who he really is, which means that man is awakened from this dream which he calls his ordinary life and that his soul is freed from the confines of that illusory prison of the ego which has its objective counterpart in what is called "the world" in religious parlance. By appealing to the true nature of man, Sufism fulfils the real needs of his nature, not what he feels to be his needs in terms of outer impressions and forms which the soul receives continually from the outer world, into which it has plunged its roots. Man seeks his psychic and spiritual needs outwardly precisely because he does not know who he is. Sufism reminds man to seek all that he needs inwardly within himself, to tear his roots from the outer world and plunge them in the Divine Nature, which resides at the center of his heart. Sufism removes man from his state of *asfal sāfilīn* in order to reinstate him in his primordial perfection of *ahsan taqwīm* wherein he finds within himself all that he had sought outwardly, for being united with God he is separate from nothing. As Hāfiz says:

سالها دل طلب جام جم از ما میکرد وآنچه خود داشت ز بیگانه تمنا میکرد

For many years our heart sought the "cup of Jamshid"[16] from us;
It sought from the stranger what it possessed itself.[17]

Or, as Abū Yazīd Bastāmi has said, "I triply divorced the world and alone proceeded to the Alone. I stood before the Presence and cried, ‘Lord God, I desire none but Thee. If I possess Thee, I possess all’.

"When God recognized my sincerity, the first grace that He accorded me was that he removed the chaff of the self from before me".[18] Sufism speaks essentially of three elements: the nature of God, the nature of man and the spiritual virtues, which alone make possible the realization of God and which alone can prepare man to become worthy of the exalted station of *ahsan taqīm*, of becoming the total theophany of God's Names and Qualities.[19] These are the eternal elements of Sufism as of every true mystical path. The end is God, the beginning man in his terrestrial state and the way or path that which links man to God—through the method that engenders the spiritual virtues in the soul of man and the doctrine that outlines the contour of the Universe through which the traveler or mystic is to journey to reach the Divine Presence and gain true immortality.

The heart enquired of the soul
What is the beginning of this business?
What its end, and what its fruit?
The soul answered:
The beginning of it is
the annihilation of self,
Its end faithfulness,
And its fruit immortality.[20]

(Khwājah ‘Abdullāh Ansāri)

The mystic path as it exists in Sufism is one in which man dies to his carnal nature in order to be reborn *in divinis* and hence to become united with the Truth.

Will the seeker of God be content to be far?
Nay, for he needeth no less than Union...
He dieth before his death to live in his Lord,
Since after this death is the supreme migration.
He calleth himself to account ere he be called.
He herein most fitted to act for the Truth.
The Truth's Being he seeth before his own,
And after it, and wheresoever he turn.
Alone God was, and with Him naught else.
He is now as He was, lastly as firstly,
Essentially One, with naught beside Himself,
Inwardly Hidden, Outwardly Manifest,
Without beginning, without end. Whate'er thou seest,
Seest thou His Being. Absolute Oneness
No ‘but’ hath and no `except'. How should God's Essence
Be confined with a veil? No veil there but His Light.[21]

(Shaykh al-‘Alawī)

What Sufism has to teach about the Divine Nature, the Universe and man, we cannot analyze here, and we will only emphasize that its teachings revolve around the two fundamental doctrines of the "Transcendent Unity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) and the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).[22] All things are theophanies of the Divine Names and Qualities and derive their existence from the One Being who alone "is". And man is the only creature in this world who is centrally located so that he reflects the Divine Names and Qualities in a total and conscious manner. To become a saint in Islam is to realize all the possibilities of the human state, to become the Universal Man. The mystical quest is none other than the realization of this state, which is also union with God, for the Universal Man is the mirror in which are reflected all the Divine Names and Qualities. Through the Universal Man God contemplates Himself and all things that He has brought into being.

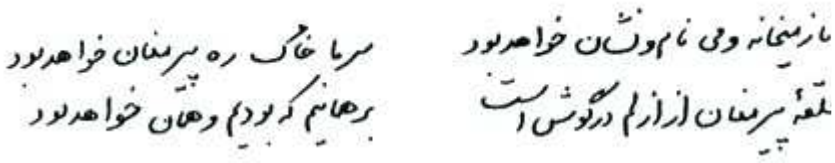
The message of Sufism is timeless precisely because it speaks of truths which determine what one might call the pre-temporal existence of man in relation with God and which are based on elements of reality both transcendent and immanent within human nature which neither evolve nor decay. To this doctrinal message is attached a method derived like the doctrine from the Quran and prophetic *Hadīth* and possessing

efficacy only by virtue of the particular grace (*barakah*) made available through initiation and transmitted from master to disciple going back to the Prophet himself.

To understand the doctrine is to possess intellectual intuition (*dhawq*), which is already a divine gift. But to accept to follow the method, to realize its necessity and to be willing to surrender oneself to the discipline of a Master as well as to the obligations of the *Sharī'ah* or Divine Law, which is the basis for all authentic practices of Sufism, requires yet another divine gift, which is none other than faith (*īmān*).

"The merit of faith is fidelity to the supernaturally natural receptivity of primordial man; it means remaining as God made us and remaining at His disposition with regard to a message from Heaven which might be contrary to earthly experience, while being incontestable in view of subjective as well as objective criteria".[23]

If man possesses this faith and is willing to undergo the necessary spiritual travail under the direction of an authentic Master, then he is reborn in the spiritual world with its infinite horizons and delivered from the prison of contingency and the finiteness of the terrestrial world that surrounds him. Sufism, based upon the sacred forms of Islam, enables man to transcend the finite and reach the Infinite through these very forms. Thanks to the *barakah* present in its methods, it makes possible the liquification of the outer crust of man's being, thus revealing to man his own divine center, which is the "Throne of the Compassionate" (*'arsh al-rahmān*) to use the Islamic expression, and by virtue of the same transformation making the cosmos and all that it contains transparent so that the infinite content becomes revealed through the finite form. In this manner Sufism achieves the goal of the mystical quest, a goal which is perennially sought since it lies within the depth of human existence itself. As long as man is man this search continues and must continue; otherwise the world would simply cease to exist, for it would no longer have *a raison d'être*. To quote Hafīz again:



As long as the name and sign of the tavern and the wine remain
Our head shall be the dust of the path of the "Wise Magi".
The ring of the "Wise Magi" has been in my ear since pre-eternity;
We continue to be what we were, and we will continue to be so in the future.[24]

* * *

With its universal doctrine and method as well as the living tradition which guarantees the efficacy of its practices, Sufism contains within itself the possibility of being practiced in any circumstance in which man finds himself, in the traditional world as well as the modern one whose manifestations seem to negate the Divine and make man forget who he is and where he is going. Since it is based on the social and juridical teachings of Islam, Sufism is meant to be practiced within society and not in

a monastic environment outside the social order. The Sufi bears spiritual poverty (*faqr*) within himself even if he lives outwardly amidst the riches of the world. The world has died in him and he lives in the world without being seduced by it. Sufism is able to integrate man in his Divine Center wherever he may be, provided he is willing to dedicate himself to the Way, which, being sacred, asks of man all that he is.[25] Likewise Sufism is also the way of integration of the active and contemplative lives so that man is able to remain receptive inwardly to the influences of heaven while outwardly he remains most active in a world which he moulds according to his inner spiritual nature rather than being its prisoner as is the case of profane man,

In this way Sufism bestows upon Islam a dimension in depth through which outer forms become channels of an inner illumination. Through it the exoteric forms of Islam gain the universality which comes from the Formless alone. It thus regenerates the moral teachings of the religion from within and at the same time provides those metaphysical and cosmological doctrines which alone can answer the needs for causality on the part of certain believers and prevent the intelligent from seeking the fulfillment of these needs outside the tradition.

Sufism also renders a great service to Islam in the question of comparative religion which, because of the spread of modernism, is becoming an important problem for certain Muslims and will certainly become even more important in the future. Religions can be studied historically as phenomena or theologically or can even be tolerated for humanitarian reasons. But this is far from enough. To tolerate another religion is to believe it to be false yet accept its presence, much as one tolerates pain as inevitable but would rather that it did not exist. To understand another orthodox religion in depth is not only to analyze its historical manifestations or even theological formulations but is also to reach the inner truths from which spring all the outer manifestations of a religious tradition. It means to go from the phenomena to the noumena, from the form to the essence wherein resides the truths of all religions and where alone a religion can be really understood and accepted.

Sufism being itself the message of the essence in the form or of the Center at the periphery, it can guide man from the phenomena to the noumena, from the form (*sūrah*) to the meaning (*ma'nā*) to use the Sufi technical terminology itself. This fact coupled with the particularly universal character of Islam, which is reflected in the insistence of the Quran upon man's accepting the authenticity of previous religions, has made of the Sufis throughout history the great proponents of the "transcendent unity of religions", whose principles they have explicitly formulated. Some like Ibn ʻArabī and Maulānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī have even applied this concept to specific teachings of non-Islamic religions. Sufism provides the metaphysics necessary to carry out the study of comparative religion in depth so that man can accept the validity of every detail of the authentic religions of mankind and at the same time see beyond these details the transcendent unity of these religions.[26] It is the treasury from which Islam can draw in its confrontation with other religions of the world in the contemporary context. It can also provide many principles for Western scholars who are seeking so desperately today for a meaningful study of comparative religion which would do justice to the nature of religion itself.[27]

There are also other fields in which Sufism could be of operative and practical significance for the West, even among those who cannot follow it themselves. Being a

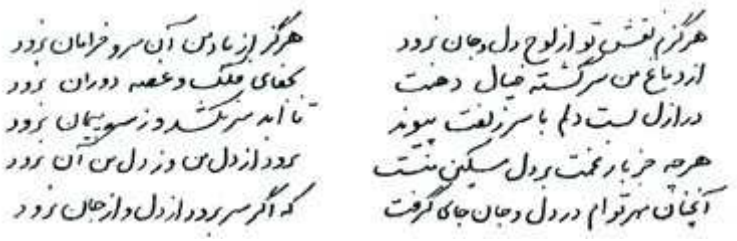
living example of the mystical way in its fullness, it contains universal teachings which could certainly help resuscitate forgotten elements in the Christian mystical life, elements which alone can revitalize the mystical teachings and methods of Christianity.[28] Unfortunately until now most Western scholars of Sufism have tried to explain it away in terms of historical influences as if the yearning of man's soul for God could ever be due to historical borrowing. But now, thanks to the few authentic and authoritative works on Sufism which have appeared during the past few years,[29] those whose interests are serious are becoming ever more aware of the aid that Sufism can offer them in charting a course toward the Center in this web of illusion and confusion which the modern world has spun around the minds and souls of so many men. Because it is concerned with the perennial and the universal, Sufism remains as relevant today as in every age past and speaks to the seeking non-Muslim as well as to the Muslim provided there is an ear to hear and an eye to see.

It might be asked that, granted that Sufism can provide answers for the perennial questions posed for man by the very nature of his situation in the world and his intelligence, that is, questions of the mysteries of "pre-natal" and "posthumous" existence and of our present situation in the total order of things, but what about the pressing and urgent problems of modern man? The answer would be that had not the truths expounded by Sufism, as by every other authentic metaphysical teaching, been forgotten by the modern world, there would not have been the so-called pressing problems of modern man. Problems always result from a particular ignorance. Modern man wants to eliminate the transcendent dimension of his life and yet not suffer from suffocation in the two dimensional world he has created for himself. He wants to kill all the gods and yet remain human, which is a contradiction precisely because, as stated above, man can remain human only by being faithful to his theomorphic nature.

To the problems caused by the forgetting of the transcendent dimension of life by modern man, by the imprisonment of his being in the cage of the material world and by the limiting of his horizon to a purely corporeal one, even if it contain nebula millions of light years distant from us, Sufism would answer by recalling the Truth that man was made for immortality and his intelligence was created to grasp the Absolute. Hence no mortal existence, no matter how streamlined, can satisfy his soul, nor can all the information in the world, with which he is bombarded day and night, take the place of the Absolute which his intelligence seeks by nature. To the problems of the pathetic lot of modern, secularized man, Sufism would only answer by pointing out that man has become miserable only because he no longer knows who he is; and the modern sciences of man as they are usually taught do not aid him one iota in discovering his true identity.[30] It would add further that the very quest of youth today for "vision" through drugs, or for occultist and pseudo-mystical practices is itself proof of the Sufi conception of human nature. The positivists of the nineteenth century certainly did not extrapolate such happenings as we see today to be the next stage in the so-called progress of man. Sufism sees in all these efforts the desperate attempt on the part of many, for whom the false idols have been broken, to reach the Infinite and the Eternal, an attempt which alas, because of the lack of discrimination and discipline as well as the scarcity of authentic mystical ways, results often in the fall into the infernal depths of the psyche rather than the elevation into the state of beatific vision. But these phenomena remain a proof, albeit in reverse, of the perennity of the mystical quest.

On the positive side the very doctrines and methods of Sufism can act as criteria for judging all that passes in the modern world for "ways of realization", at least for those with a discriminating spirit. It can also turn this urge to follow the mystical way into a wholesome and meaningful direction for those who are willing to accept its discipline or to apply its insights to their own situation. In both cases, Sufism remains a grace from Heaven and sign of Divine Mercy (*rahmah*) not only for Muslims but also for non-Muslims, some of whom are seeking so desperately and so often in the wrong places. In such cases Sufism can act as the net that prevents a fall into the bottomless pit of the "lower waters".

The presence of Sufism in the world is thus a sign of both the perennity of the mystical quest and the eternal effusion of the Divine Mercy. It is a reminder of the eternal pact made between God and man by virtue of which man remains in quest of the Divinity as long as he remains truly human. The man who remembers this pact and his own true identity remains ever faithful to his nature, hence to his quest after the Divinity, hence to the Divinity Who is already present at the center of his being.



Thy form shall never leave the tablet of my heart and soul;
That strutting cyprus tree shall never leave my memory.
The thought of thy lips, from the brain of one bewildered like myself
Shall never leave, whatever be the oppression of heaven or grief of the age.
My heart became bound to the lock of thy hair from pre-eternity;
It will never rebel even until post-eternity; it shall never break its pact.
Whatever lies upon my heart, save the weight of thy sorrow,
Shall pass away, but thy sorrow shall not leave my heart.
Thy love hath become planted in my heart and soul in such a way
That were my head to disappear, thy love would still remain.[31]

(Hāfiz)

Precisely because it is a message of the eternal to what is permanent and abiding within man, Sufism, like other authentic spiritual ways, is perennial and remains engraved in the very texture of the human soul. Men come and go but Sufism remains immutable and transcendent like the vault of heaven, reminding man of his immortality and beatitude.

NOTES

[1] After over a century of complete surrender to historicism and evolutionism only recently have some of the scholars and scientists in the West been becoming aware

that the permanent elements of human nature and of the relation of man to the cosmos dominate over the transient and passing elements which have been emphasized so much as to obliterate the much more blinding reality of the permanence of things. See E. Zolla (ed.), *I Valori permanenti nel divenire storico*,Roma, 1968, and the article in that volume by S. H. Nasr, "Man in the Universe, Permanence amidst Apparent Change", pp. 287-298; also published in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Autumn, 1968, pp. 244-254.

[2] Kamāl al-Din Husayn Wā'iz Kāshifī, *Mawāhib 'aliyyah* or *Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī*, vol. IV, Tehran, 1329 (A. H. solar), p. 427.

[3] See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963, Chapter I.

[4] We must caution the reader concerning the word mystical, which we use here in its original sense of having to do with the "divine mysteries". For us it refers to the inner aspect of a revealed and orthodox religion, bound to spiritual methods and techniques derived from that revelation, and not to vague reveries or individualistic whims and fancies or worst of all to forms of pseudo-occultism such as those that are becoming so prevalent today. "Scientific works commonly define Sufism as `Moslem mysticism' and we too would readily adopt the epithet `mystical' to designate that which distinguishes Sufism from the simply religious aspect of Islam if that word still bore the meaning given it by the Greek Fathers of the early Christian Church and those who followed their spiritual line: they used it to designate what is related to knowledge of the 'mysteries'." T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. by D. M. Matheson, Lahore, 1959, p. 12.

[5] The metaphysical principle that knowledge and being are ultimately one and that through intellection the cosmos has gained its existence underlies both the gnostic and the theosophical doctrines of Islam. Without an understanding of this principle the essential role that gnosis and the contemplation of the Divine plays in the sustenance of the cosmic environment cannot be understood. For an explanation of this principle see S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1968, chapter 13 and *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapters 11 on.

[6] "Man, whether he be concerned in the plural or the singular, or whether his function be direct or indirect, stands like 'a fragment of absoluteness' and is made for the Absolute; he has no other choice before him. In any case, one can define the social in terms of Truth, but one cannot define Truth in terms of the social". F. Schuon, "No Activity Without Truth", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Autumn, 1969, pp. 196.

[7] *Nahj al-balāghah*, trans. by Syed Mohammad Askari Jafery, Karachi, 1960, p. 286.

[8] Sa'd ud Dīn Mahmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i Rāz, The Mystic Rose Garden*. trans. by E. H. Whinfield, London, 1880, p. 21.

[9] Shaykh al-'Arabī al-Darqāwi, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. by T. Burckhardt, London, 1969, p. 4.

[10] From the quatrains translated by E. H. Rodwell, cited in M. Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love, An Anthology of Sufism*, London, 1954, p. 63.

[11] Rūmī, *Dīwāni Shams Tabrīz*, trans. by R. A. Nicholson, Cambridge, 1898, p. 343.

[12] On this question see S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, chapter 13 and *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, chapter 15.

[13] This cardinal truth has been fully explained in the different writings of F. Schuon, especially his *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1953.

[14] In fact the Sufis refer to all true spiritual paths and metaphysical doctrines of other religions as *tasawwuf*.

[15] The term *alast* refers to the Quranic verse *Alastu bi rabbikum*, "Am I not your Lord?" (VII, 172), which concerns the relation between God and man in pre-eternity before the creation of the world. See S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966, pp. gaff.

[16] The *Jam-i jam* or "cup of Jamshīd" refers to the cup of the mythical Persian king Jamshīd in which he saw the reflection of all events and phenomena. It has become in Sufism the symbol of the heart of the gnostic in which all realities are reflected, the eye of the heart (*`ayn al-qalb* in Arabic or *chasm-i dil* in Persian) with which the mystic "sees" the supernal realities.

[17] Translation by S. H. Nasr.

[18] Farīd al-Dīn ʻAttār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, trans. by A. J. Arberry, London, 1966, p. 122.

[19] See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam, pp.* 131ff. Concerning Sufism see also Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1970; T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine;* M. Lings, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1961; S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapter 3; and S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Studies*, Beirut, 1967, Part III.

[20] Translated by Sir Jogendra Singh, *The Invocations of Sheikh 'Abdullah Ansâri*, London, Wisdom of the East Series, 1939, p. 42.

[21] Lings, A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century, pp. 199-200.

[22] See S. H. Nasr, Science and Civilization in Islam, chapter 13.

[23] F. Schuon, "Understanding and Believing", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1969, p. 131.

[24] Translated by S. H. Nasr. Wine in Sufi imagery symbolizes both divine love and the realized aspect of gnosis, while the tavern is the spiritual centre of the Sufis. The "Wise Magi" (*pīr-i mughān*) of course symbolizes the spiritual master.

[25] See S. H. Nasr, "Sufism and the Integration of Man", *Islamic Review of Arab Affairs*, Sept. 1967, pp. 11-14.

[26] See F. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity of Religions;* also S. H. Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions", *Islamic Quarterly*, vol. X, no. 3-4, 1966, pp. 47-68.

[27] The efforts of W. C. Smith in several of his recent works and of K. Morgan and Huston Smith come to mind particularly in this context.

[28] Despite the fact that he still had much to learn in questions of the authentic spiritual life and especially of the metaphysical doctrines that underlie it, Thomas Merton sought genuine contacts with Sufism until the very end of his life, in order to revitalize through this contact contemplative methods in Christianity. Massignon, the great French specialist in Sufism, also drew from Sufism as a practical aid to his Christian spiritual life.

[29] We have in mind particularly the writings of F. Schuon, T. Burckhardt, M. Lings and several others of the traditional authors in the West.

[30] See J. Servier, *L'Homme et l'invisible*, Paris, 1964, where the author, himself an anthropologist, analyzes with much insight the shortcomings which prevent modern anthropology from understanding who the "anthropos" really is.

[31] Translated by S. H. Nasr.